





Original article

# Literacy Skills in Social Studies Textbooks in Türkiye and a Critical Approach

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## Abstract

Literacy is a lifelong process through which individuals learn basic knowledge, skills, values, and concepts. Textbooks are an effective teaching tool for teaching literacy skills. This study critically examines the representation of literacy skills in Turkish social studies textbooks within the framework of the 2018 Social Studies Curriculum (SSC). The research aims to analyse how literacy competencies—environmental, digital, financial, map, legal, media, and political—are integrated into textbooks for grades 4 through 7 and to evaluate their adequacy in meeting contemporary educational goals. Employing a qualitative research design based on document analysis, the study systematically reviewed curriculum documents and textbooks approved by the Ministry of National Education. Data were coded and analysed using MAXQDA software to determine the distribution of literacy skills across learning areas, units, and grade levels. The findings reveal significant inconsistencies between curriculum objectives and textbook content. Financial, political, and map literacy are relatively well represented, while environmental and legal literacy are scattered, and cultural literacy is not included as a literacy despite its thematic relevance. In particular, environmental literacy appears to be poorly aligned with the spiral curriculum model at the 7th grade level. Digital and media literacy is reduced to functional technology use rather than critical, ethical, and civic participation, reflecting technological reductionism. Similarly, political and legal literacy are often confused with each other, obscuring their distinct pedagogical purposes. The study concluded that although social studies textbooks cover a wide range of literacy skills, their treatment is fragmented, superficial, and inconsistent with international standards. To strengthen literacy education, the curriculum should incorporate emerging types of literacy such as cultural and scientific literacy, adopt clearer achievement goals, and support interdisciplinary, inquiry-based teaching methods. Such reforms are expected to ensure vertical and horizontal alignment across grade levels and better equip students with the critical, participatory, and citizenship skills necessary for the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Social Studies, Literacy, Literacy Skills, Textbook, Critical Thinking

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, literacy skills have transcended traditional boundaries, encompassing a spectrum of competencies vital for students to navigate the complexities of the 21st century. Social studies education, in particular, serves as a conduit for imparting these multifaceted literacy skills, fostering informed, critical, and engaged citizens (Karatekin, 2013). In Türkiye, the integration of literacy skills into social studies textbooks has attracted attention, and the effectiveness of these skills and their importance in relation to contemporary educational goals have been emphasised (Demir, 2023; Güleç & Hüdavendigâr, 2020; Şahin & Karatekin, 2022). Moreover, the content of social studies textbooks has undergone a transformation from a single-disciplinary approach to an interdisciplinary one since 2005, incorporating elements from psychology, sociology, economics, and technology (Tomal & Yılar, 2019; Sensekeri, 2022). Despite this shift, concerns persist regarding the adequacy of content in promoting critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills. Tavsanlı et al. (2023) highlight a decline in objectives targeting analysis and evaluation levels in recent curricula, suggesting a need for more intellectually demanding content. Additionally, the portrayal of multiculturalism and human rights in textbooks has been critiqued for its limited scope and depth (Mandell, 2008; Martin, 2005; Ng, 2012). Therefore, before focusing on the main theme of the topic, it is useful to provide information on the definition of social studies.

The social studies course has been an important lesson since the social existence of the individual takes the source of information from various disciplines of social sciences (history, geography, political science, sociology, psychology, etc.). It also combines this information under a theme (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2005). The social studies course does not have a precise definition based on the common points of many different definitions. However, it is a collection of information based on the interaction of social sciences and human relations, where citizenship education is the main purpose, democratic and social participation skills are taught, and national values and beliefs are transferred from generation to generation (Doğanay, 2008, p. 80).

"Social studies is the set of information that brings facts and events, knowledge, values and skills, and accompanies the individual's socialisation goal in the process of harmony with society in the context of the past, present and future, without distinguishing the individual from his/her social and physical environment" (Çakıroğlu, 1987, p. 449). It uses the findings of various disciplines to raise citizens who are active and aware of their responsibilities (Sönmez, 2010, p. 15). In other words, social studies course is the application of the content of social sciences at the primary education level, and change and continuity affect social dynamism (Safran, 1993, p. 2).

Textbooks are in line with the curriculum's purpose, knowledge, achievement, value, skills and concepts. Textbooks emphasize skills and values rather than just transferring knowledge because

they are one of today's most important teaching tools. In addition, they play an active role in transferring information in the learning and teaching process (Gömleksiz & Kan, 2009).

The skill is that the individual performs an action in line with his/her purpose and demonstrates this with his/her ability (Turkish Language Association [TDK], 2022). In contemporary curricula, skills are organised under the conditions of time, taking into account the needs of the individual and society. In learning environments and learning processes, individuals' acquiring the skills in the program contributes positively to the permanence of the learned information and their ability to actively use it in life (Özdemir, 2009, p. 21).

Under the skills in the program, individuals and their social structure are developing to adapt to the current situation. For social studies teaching, the acquisition of skills in the curriculum is directly in line with raising citizens with problem-solving skills, scientific thinking and reasoning, and active participation in democratic and social activities. It also enables students to know their rights and responsibilities, to be innovative and contemporary, to adopt national values, to adapt to universal values, and to have empathy skills. With the last updated program, environmental literacy, digital literacy, financial literacy, map literacy, legal literacy, media literacy, and political literacy skills are included in social studies (MoNE, 2018, p. 9).

The concept of literacy aims to provide individuals with the skills to acquire, read, write and use information in a new situation because of learning to read and write (Önal, 2010). Although many subjects used literacy terms and concepts in the past, the focus is on reading, writing and acquiring knowledge skills (Gee, 2000; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006).

A literate person is someone with a certain level of education (TDK, 2022). Literacy is a concept that consists of basic learning skills and effective communication with individuals (The National Literacy Trust [NLT], 2022). Recently, literacy has become a concept beyond a range of reading, writing and counting skills. Especially thanks to the developing information and communication technologies, it has become very easy to develop literacy skills (Street, 1993; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2022, p. 12). Based on these explanations, literacy enables us to gain basic knowledge, skills and values. In addition, thanks to our literacy skills, their transfer to future generations will be easier (Altun & Gürer, 2005, p. 178). At the same time, literacy is a concept that gains meaning with lifelong learning (Aşıcı, 2009).

Anyone literate in this age of rapid development of information and technology in the 21st century can also use information and communication technologies very well. S/he can conduct research, obtain information and use social media effectively in virtual environments. Thus, being literate makes our lives easier and can lead to the emergence of new situations (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010). Like social media, the social studies course is directly related to daily life. It is an important tool in transferring the knowledge of social sciences to new generations (Altun, 2013). The

skills specified in the social studies course can also support the development of literacy skills. Thus, it helps to raise active and participatory citizens in the future.

Literacy skills differ from other skills, as they emerge because of developments in the age of technology and communication and expand gradually in meaning, content and scope. "Literacy skills are closely related in reflecting the interdisciplinary content of social studies and gaining versatile skills" (Çelikkaya & Yakar, 2020, p. 2-3). In this context, it is important to give some information about literacy explained in the last updated social studies curriculum.

Environmental literacy is about the interaction of individuals with their physical and social environment in social studies. The social studies course now focuses more on the environment-human relationship and the history of the environment (Karakuş, Karaaslan & Pehlivan, 2018). Environmental literacy is united in common decisions regarding citizenship and the environment (Yakar, 2020).

Gilster (1997) first explained the concept of digital literacy and defined it as the ability to access and use resources through a networked computer. In the simplest terms, digital literacy is the individual's ability to survive in the digital age (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). Social studies courses are important for digital literacy education since social studies courses take the knowledge of the developing digital world and play a direct role in the education of the individual and society. Digital technology is an ideal level for digital literacy skills that aim to raise conscious and active citizens who can critically read tools and applications (Dolanbay, 2020, p. 67).

"Financial literacy expects students to distinguish their wishes and needs by gaining financial literacy skills, making conscious choices about economics, and being conscious consumers. It also expects them to create their budget and use resources without wasting them based on the achievements of the social studies curriculum related to financial literacy." (Akhan, 2009, p. 172). Financial literacy concerns how people use and evaluate money (Boz, 2019). It aims to fulfil individual and social tasks (Güvenç, 2017); to understand the value of money and to benefit in markets (Kadoya & Khan, 2019); to use, manage, and evaluate individual money; and to have financial knowledge and skills (Kenton, 2019).

Map literacy includes using maps in daily life, using maps in case of problems, and understanding maps. Maps in social studies textbooks are extremely important for learning geography's basic knowledge and literacy skills (Aksoy & Sönmez, 2012). Map literacy skills are specified at the 4th, 5th and 6th-grade levels in the 2018 Social Studies Curriculum (SSC). Map literacy enables one to see events, phenomena, objects and problems as a whole (Duman & Girgin, 2011, p. 187). Using maps in social studies improves students' map literacy skills in navigation, location, and space (Demircioğlu & Akengin, 2012, p. 207).

Legal literacy aims to learn the basic concepts of law, understand and analyse the problems related to legal processes and legal systems, produce solutions to the problems encountered, and contribute to the development of legal processes (Kara & Tangülü, 2017).

Media literacy is the ability to access different messages, both printed and unprinted, and evaluate and communicate them. It is predicted that the individual who can consciously use the media thanks to media literacy education will contribute to their knowledge of socio-political issues (Çelikkaya et al., 2022, p. 97). Finally, since it includes many concepts such as political literacy, policy and political forms in social studies courses, democracy, citizenship and non-governmental organisations, social studies course has a very important function in acquiring political literacy skills (Tarhan, 2019). Despite curricular advancements, there remains a critical need to examine the extent to which these literacy skills are effectively represented and operationalized within social studies textbooks—the primary instructional materials in Turkish classrooms. Studies have indicated that while textbooks have evolved to include interdisciplinary content, there are inconsistencies in the depth and breadth of literacy skill coverage. For instance, Sensekeri (2022) evaluated the incorporation of media content in social studies textbooks against UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy (MIL) framework, finding that while media excerpts are present, they often lack diversity and fail to meet the comprehensive criteria set by UNESCO.

Under the studies in the field of literacy, individuals express themselves better by improving their literacy skills, their self-confidence increases, they improve their communication skills, and they are aware of their rights and responsibilities such as using the digital world (Gee, 2000; NLT, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Based on these explanations, the study aimed to examine how and how literacy skills in textbooks and social studies curricula are included. This study examined the role of textbooks taught in 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grades in gaining literacy skills.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

This research aims to examine how and in what way the social studies curriculum and textbooks in Türkiye contain literacy skills. The research questions accompanying this study are as follows:

1. What is the distribution of literacy skills according to learning areas in social studies textbooks (4th-7th grades)?
2. What are the achievements related to literacy skills in the 2018 Social Studies curriculum?
3. What is the distribution of literacy skills according to the learning areas of the social studies curriculum?

### **METHODS**

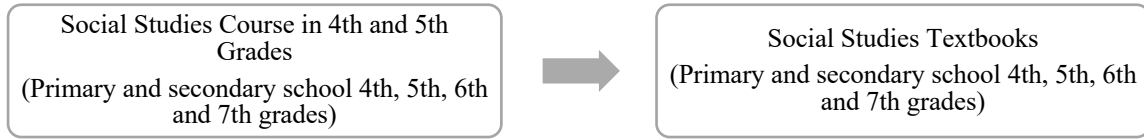
This part explains the research model, data tools and collection, analysis, validity and reliability of the research

## Research Model

The textbooks prepared within the scope of the social studies curriculum include written documents. Such documents can be used alone in qualitative research or in combination with other research methods. In this context, the research method is the document review, frequently used in qualitative studies. One of the most important features of this research method is that it contains rich content about written materials, along with systematic, planned, regular and detailed information (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 1990). Since social studies textbooks are examined within the scope of literacy, they are suitable for the nature of this research.

## Data collection tools

The data tool used in this study is the textbooks prepared within the scope of the social studies curriculum. These textbooks consist of social studies 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th-grade textbooks approved by the Ministry of National Education's Board of Education (BoE) and available for 5 years. Table 1 gives information about these two data collection tools.

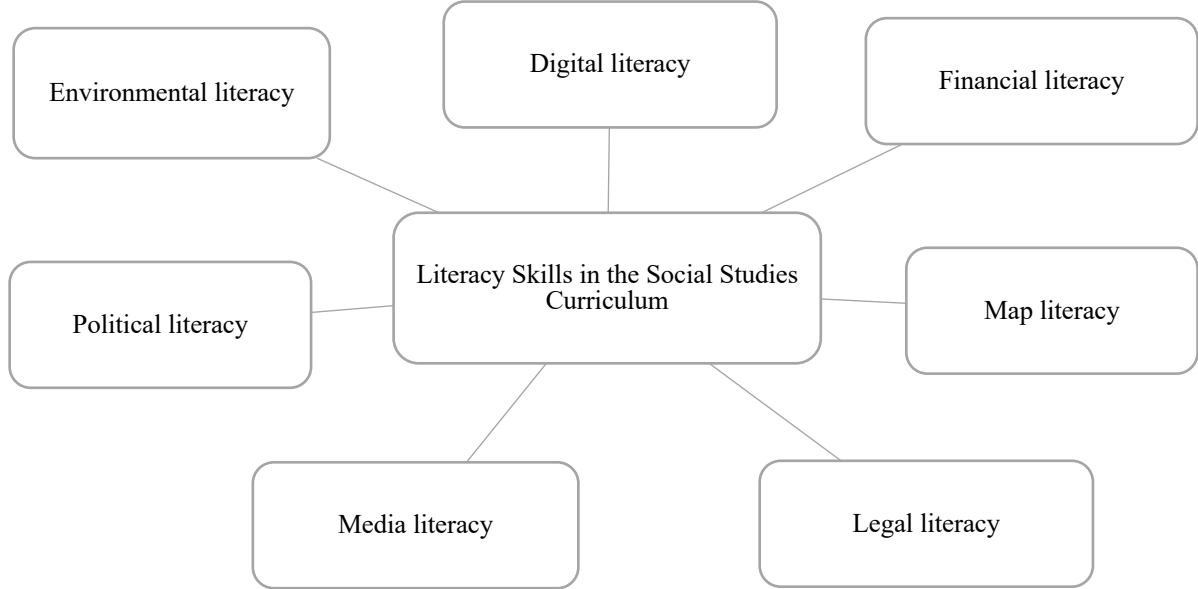


Some information about the sources used within the scope of this research is as follows: The publication years and publishing houses of textbooks may differ. Firstly, the research examined the SSC, updated in 2018, according to literacy skills. Then, it also analysed primary school 4th-grade social studies textbooks (SST) published by Tuna Publishing in 2020 (Tüysüz, 2020); secondary school and imam hatip secondary school 5th-grade SST by MoNE in 2020 (Evirgen, Özkan, & Öztürk, 2020); 6th-grade SST by Anadol Publishing in 2019 (Şahin, 2019); and the 7th grade SST by MoNE in 2019 (Gültekin, Akpınar, Nohutçu, Özerdoğan & Aygün, 2019).

## Analysis of the research

The analysis process of this research used under the document review (Merriam, 2013). The research analysed the data obtained through the documents based on the literacies described in the 2018 SSC. In addition, it carried out the data analysis process of the research according to the 2018 SSC, primary, and secondary school 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grade SST. The document analysis process was carried out according to certain stages. First, resources such as pdf were accessed electronically on the Educational Informatics Network (EIN) site of the Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Innovation and Education Technologies (DGIET). Then, the literacies explained in the 2018 SSC were determined. Figure 1 gives these literacies. In the next stage, it was determined which learning areas and achievements were compatible with which literacy. Then, the MAXQDA set, an auxiliary data analysis software in qualitative research, was used to determine which literacy is covered by SST

according to the learning area, unit and subject titles. Thanks to this data analysis software, it is possible to provide a clearer view of the coded data and to sort the descriptive data systematically. In the last stage, the information formed in the data set was transferred into shapes according to literacy. Then, these descriptive data were interpreted by transferring to the findings section.



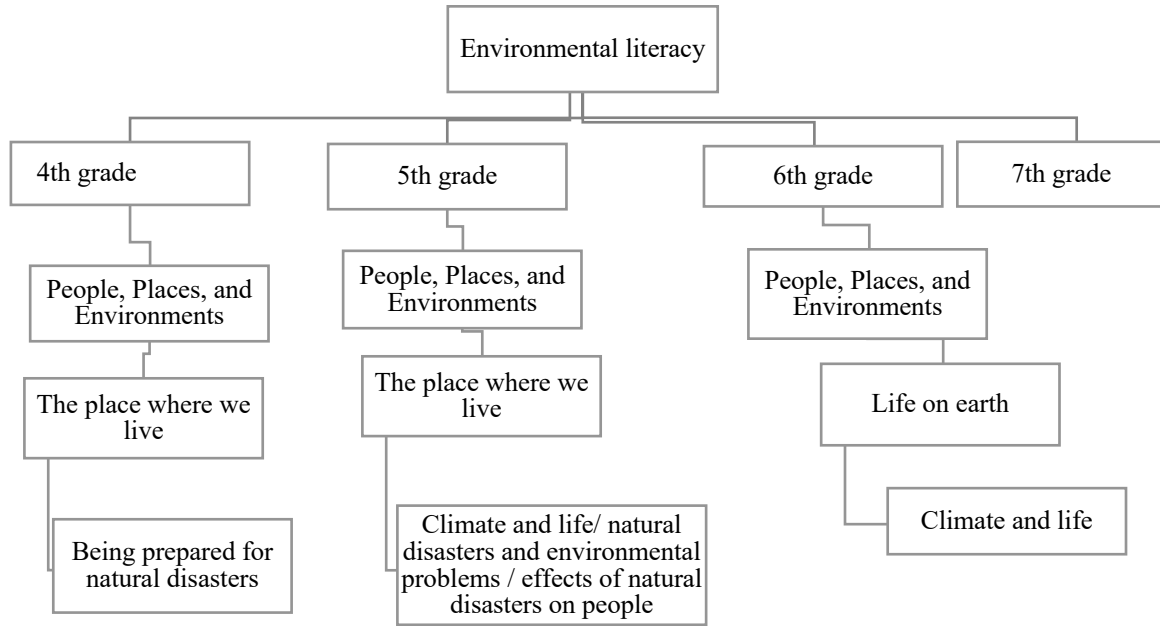
**Figure 1.** Literacy skills in the social studies curriculum

### **Validity and Reliability**

This study also conducted validity and reliability studies. In this context, the researchers first examined SSC and textbooks in coordination and then another researcher compared them. Additionally, they discussed data that were incompatible and erroneous with each other and tried to reach a consensus. Moreover, they matched the codes made by a field trainer with the codes and sequences made from the MAXQDA dataset and reached a consensus in consultation with another field trainer. The study used a direct quotation strategy to ensure the reliability of the research. The tables indicate the appropriate achievements in the social studies curriculum according to literacy with the quotation strategy.

### **FINDINGS**

This section examines social studies textbooks regarding literacy skills and includes relevant findings and comments.



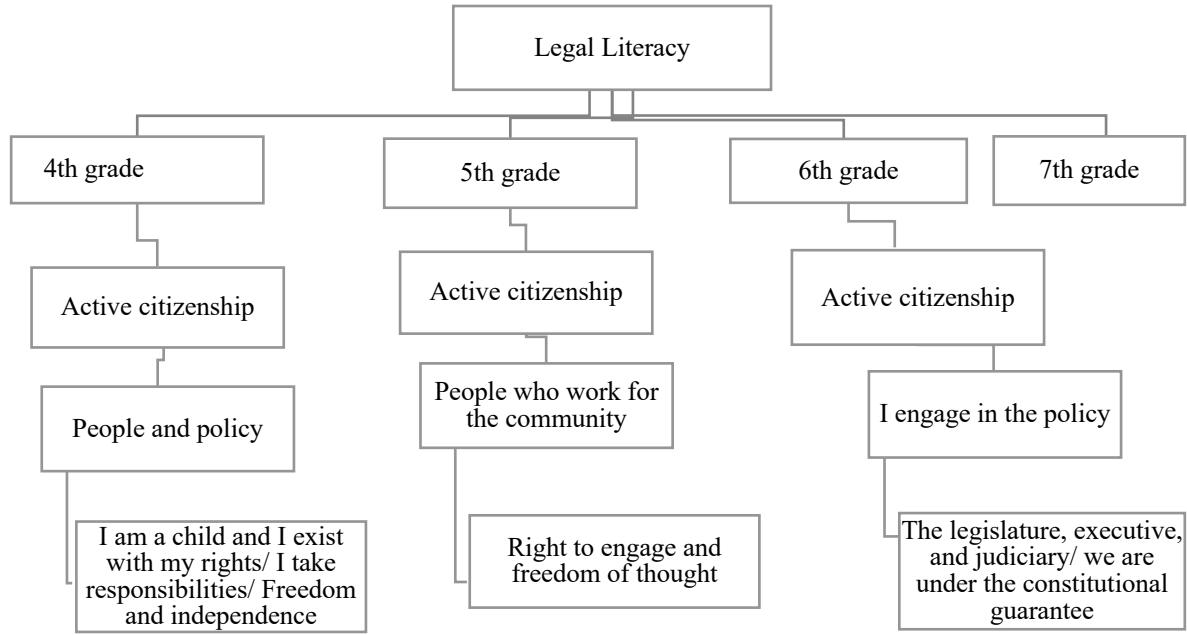
**Figure 2.** Distribution of environmental literacy in social studies textbooks according to learning areas

Considering the examinations of the analyses for environmental literacy, in this hierarchical structure, listed according to the social studies learning area, the names of the units and subjects were the same in the 4th and 5th grade SST, and the unit named "*life on earth*" in the 6th grade was aimed at environmental literacy content. However, in the 4th, 5th and 6th-grade SSTs, the unit subjects were not the same but similar to each other. No unit or subject was about environmental literacy in 7th grade SST.

Issues related to environmental literacy are of great importance for social studies courses, as students need accurate environmental knowledge to understand themselves and society well. Therefore, environmental literacy issues are under the spiral approach. Thus, based on simple subjects, they have appropriate components until abstract subjects. However, the point that draws attention here is that there was no relevant subject at the 7th-grade level. It can be as a deficiency because environmental knowledge is lifelong.

There are always changes in our world, and to be aware of these changes and to produce effective solutions to problems is possible by individuals having environmental literacy knowledge. For example, some people may view the effect of a simple natural event on humans as normal. However, it is only possible to predict how that natural event takes place and its effects on people by knowing environmental literacy. In this context, it is important to include acquisition, skill, value, and concept knowledge appropriate to the grade level to improve individuals' environmental literacy in the social studies course.



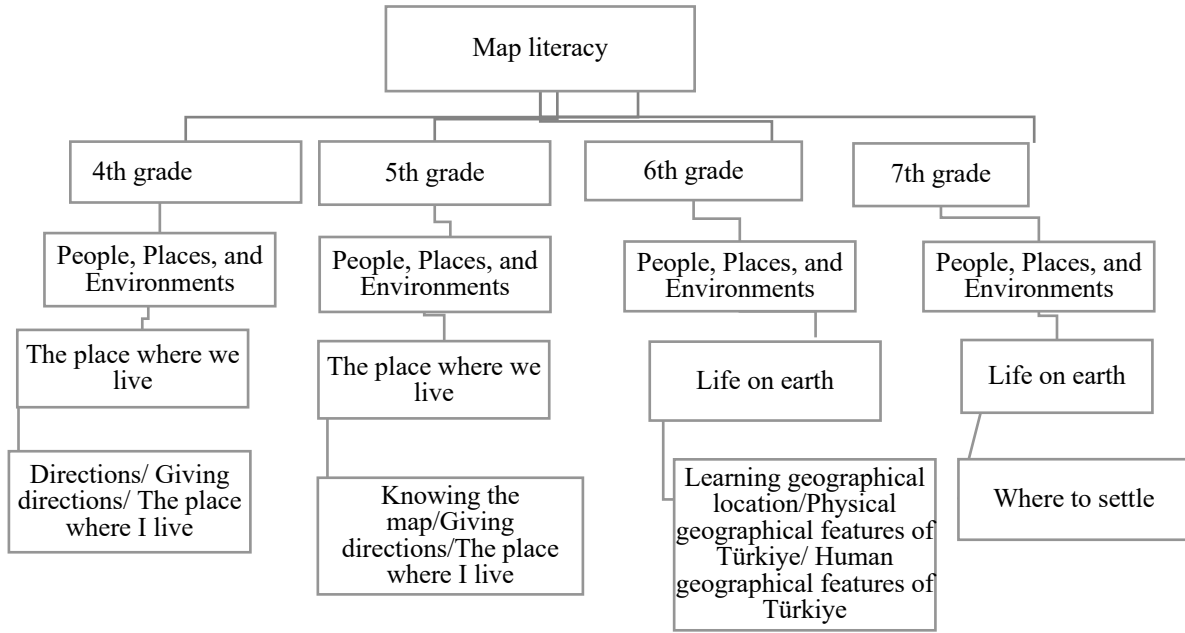


**Figure 3.** Distribution of legal literacy in social studies textbooks according to learning areas

Considering the evaluations of the analyses made within the scope of legal literacy, the unit and subject contents of legal literacy can be associated with the field of "active citizenship" learning area in the 4th, 5th and 6th grade SST. However, as the units and subjects were not the same, they differed at the grade level. In addition, there were no learning areas, units and subjects associated with legal literacy in the 7th-grade social studies textbook. Legal literacy was among the skills in the 2018 social studies curriculum. However, there was no information about the grade level, achievement and subject.

Social studies combines legal literacy with political literacy. In addition, the fact that legal and political literacy are united in the hierarchical sub-code system supports this opinion. In the aforementioned 6th grade SST, constitutional, legislative, executive and judicial issues were fully integrated with legal literacy. However, the unit titled "I engage in the policy in the 6th grade" also covered political literacy issues and was compatible with the interdisciplinary content of social studies. As a result, children need to learn their fundamental rights and freedoms and some legal concepts.

In social studies, children can benefit from current issues and case studies to improve their legal literacy. In addition, every year, social studies textbooks are important in updating the subject contents during the development and renewal process. It is essential to teach the subjects of legal literacy so that students know how the justice system works and how to defend their rights when they experience a problem. The social studies curriculum included legal literacy; however, there was not this literacy skill in the learning area and learning achievements. Only the skills gave place to it.

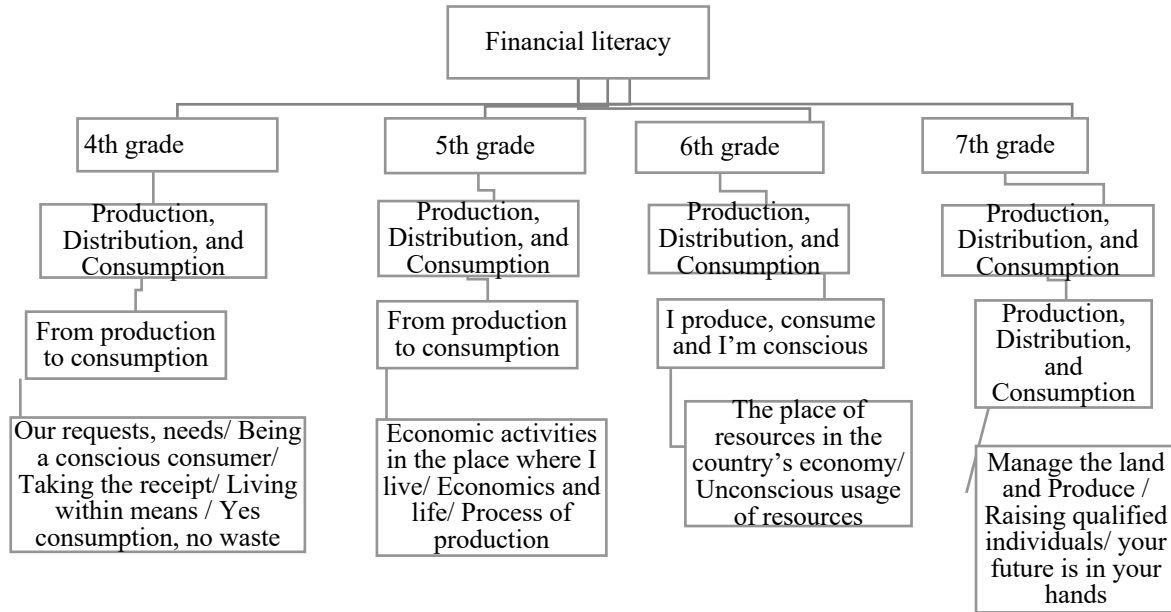


**Figure 4.** Distribution of map literacy in social studies textbooks according to learning areas

The examinations of the data on map literacy in social studies textbooks as a teaching tool showed that it aimed to teach people, places and environments at the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th-grade levels within the scope of the learning area. Map literacy was mostly taught at the basic level in the unit "where we live" in the 4th and 5th grade SST. The 6th and 7th grade SST included map literacy within the scope of unit subjects called "life on earth". Considering evaluations according to the grade level, the unit subjects were different from each other in general.

Students need to have good map literacy knowledge to use maps correctly in their lives. For this purpose, the social studies textbooks taught at primary and secondary school levels and the map literacy subjects taught in these textbooks must be teachable, understandable, remarkable and appropriate to the level. Map literacy information was under the spiral approach as direction and description from the 4th grade; recognising and knowing the map in the 5th grade, learning the location and Türkiye's location in the 6th grade, and recognising the world in the 7th grade.

Social studies teach map literacy subjects within geography subjects. In this context, teachers can use activities on classroom activities, e-applications, Google earth, various mapping tools, out-of-school learning environments and similar subjects to improve students' map literacy skills. Having only conceptual knowledge does not develop literacy skills, nor does it mean they have good map literacy skills. Students can improve their map literacy by abilities to know the place first, draw a place roughly, visualise the school's location, and draw the location of the classroom. In addition, there are other helpful abilities such as showing the house and street, getting to know and visualising the neighbourhood, district or provincial map, and finally, getting to know and trying to make a map of Türkiye.

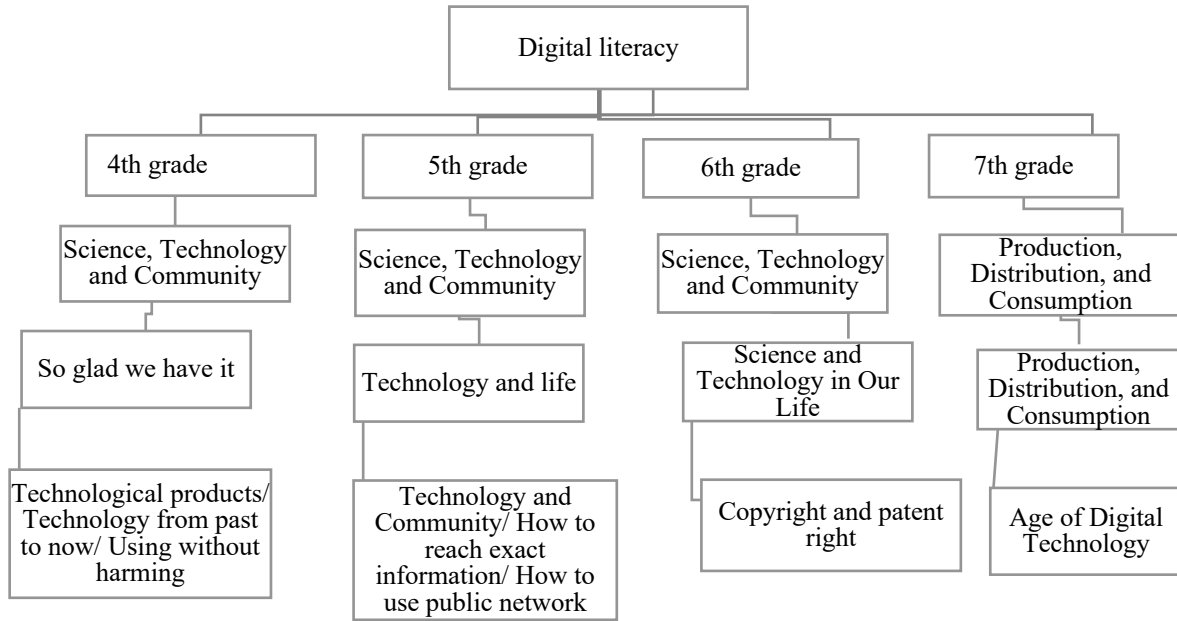


**Figure 5.** Distribution of financial literacy in social studies textbooks according to learning areas

Considering the examinations of the data related to financial literacy, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grade SSTs gave the units and subjects for financial literacy in the field of production, distribution and consumption learning areas. Considering the evaluations according to the grade level, there were differences in unit subjects. In the 4th grade, it started with the basic financial issues such as desire, need, consumption, budget and similar issues and concepts. Later, it continued with economic activities in the 5th grade, unconscious use of resources and resources in the 6th grade, raising soil, and qualified, conscious and economical people in the 7th grade. In the social studies course, the economy subjects included financial literacy subjects.

For students to actively benefit from social studies textbooks, the teacher's knowledge, skill and skill are important. Conducting some activities should improve the financial literacy of individuals. Financial literacy contents must be in line with acquisition, skill, value and concept to understand their country's financial issues and the impact of global financial markets. In the social studies course, activities related to the central bank, capital market board, various financial institutions and banks could improve students' financial literacy. Thus, students can increase their interest and sensitivity towards financial issues.

Today, while some teachers apply such activities in the teaching process, some may have problems implementing the program's requirements. It may be due to the difference in social, cultural and economic development between these regions. The bureaucratic system should play an active role in identifying these problems and developing solutions. It should also produce solutions in consultation with its stakeholders (educators, administrators, non-governmental organisations, and associations).

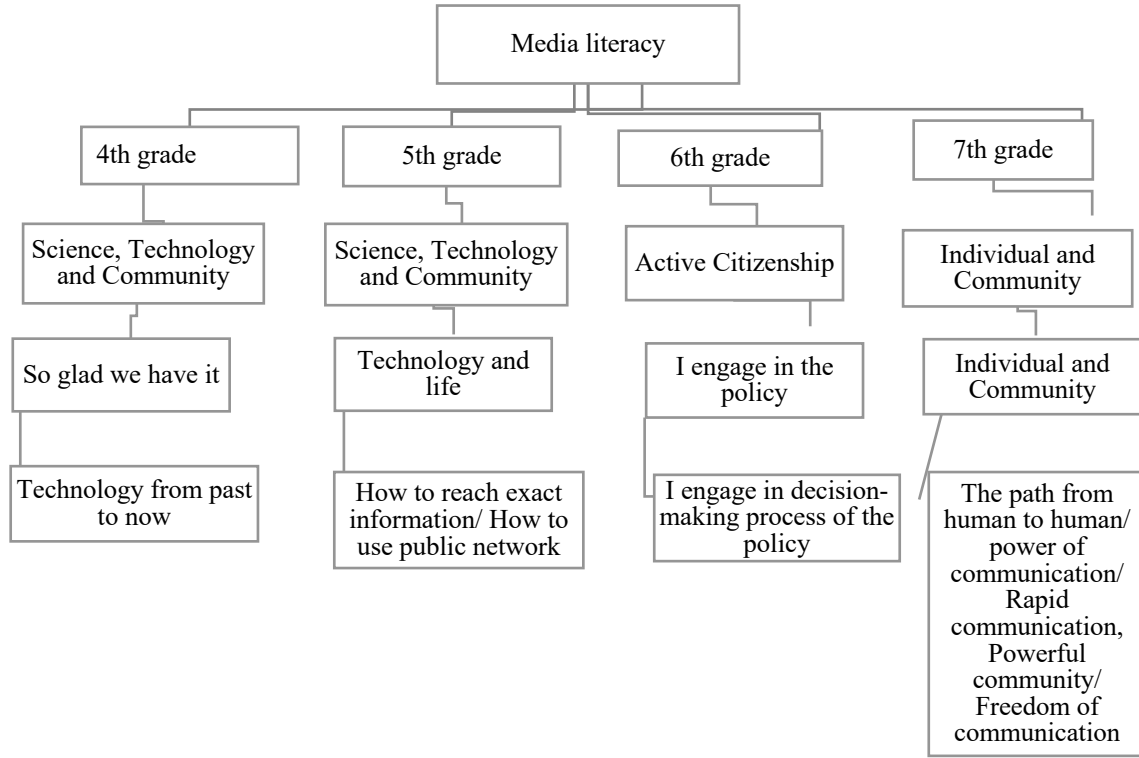


**Figure 6.** Distribution of digital literacy in social studies textbooks according to learning areas

According to the analysis of digital literacy, there was a subject called "*we are in the age of digital technology*" in the field of production, distribution and consumption learning in the 7th grade in SST. In the 4th, 5th and 6th grades, it aimed to teach digital literacy within the scope of science, technology and community learning. In today's world, we often hear concepts such as the age of technology, the digital age, and the information world because technological tools and equipment are now a part of our lives. Digital tools and equipment change the social structure and reveal new lifestyles. Individuals must be good digitally literate to understand this social change and transformation. To achieve this, the design and implementation of digital literacy issues specified in the SST according to achievements, knowledge, skills, values and concepts provide important support.

To better understand the age called digitalisation, it is essential to be a good digital literate. Digital literacy skills of students can improve thanks to e-applications and smart technological tools in the classroom. Some educational game platforms, e-education tools, concept puzzles, and web2 and web3 tools can support the development of students' digital literacy skills.

Individuals with digital literacy skills comprehend the impact of innovative, critical and scientific thinking on technological developments. S/he can also better understand the effects of scientific and technological developments on social life and the environment. Moreover, s/he realises that digital technologies impose many rights and responsibilities on the individual.

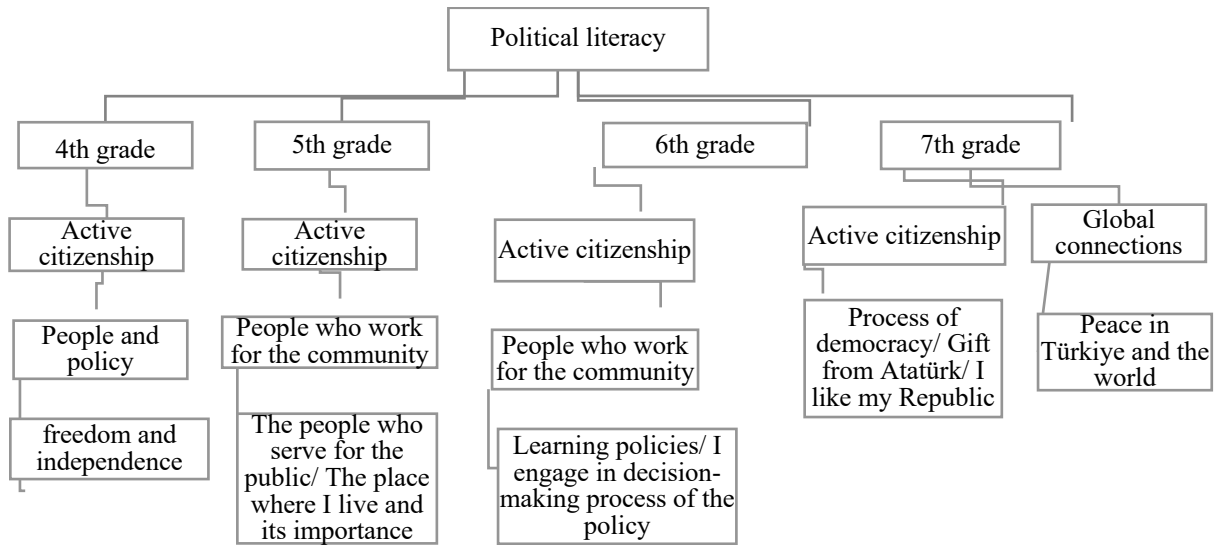


**Figure 7.** Distribution of media literacy in social studies textbooks according to learning areas

Considering the examinations of the analyses made for media literacy, some units and subjects belonging to the field of science, technology and society in 5th grade SST, active citizenship in 6th grade SST, and individual and community learning in 7th grade SST had media literacy knowledge. When evaluated within the scope of the grade level, the 7th-grade SST included media literacy subjects more than others did. Technological tools should be widely used to improve students' media literacy skills. In particular, individuals need to have accurate and realistic media information to better understand and comprehend the media and the events in daily life. For this purpose, media literacy issues in SST can be supported.

The 21st century has surged in the field of technology and information, and this development has affected all sectors. One of the sectors most affected is the media sector. Students need media literacy knowledge to understand the media and events today, and social studies course plays an active role in realising this in primary and secondary schools. Media literacy plays a direct role in developing students' communication skills. For this reason, it has important effects on students' establishing correct communication channels, exhibiting positive attitudes and behaviours, and using communication effectively in individual and social relations. It also enables students to realise the role of media in social change and development, use their rights in communication channels and fulfil their responsibilities.

It is estimated that information and communication technologies will be more involved in our lives in the future. For this reason, developing students' media literacy levels can help them keep up with their age.



**Figure 8.** Distribution of political literacy in social studies textbooks according to learning areas

Considering the political literacy data examinations, there were subjects related to political literacy skills in the field of active citizenship learning in the 5th, 6th, and 7th grade SST. In addition, there were subjects related to political literacy skills in the field of learning called global connections in the 7th grade.

Regarding grade level, there were differences in unit and subject but also similarities. Students need to learn basic knowledge and skills to develop political skills. In this context, the students' political literacy skills can be improved by activities related to institutions such as non-governmental organisations and the Turkish Grand National Assembly [TGNA] that have a say in the country's administration to increase the students' sensitivity towards political issues. Political literacy is one of the literacy with the highest number of subjects in SST.

Individuals who know their rights and fulfil their responsibilities in today's world may also have political literacy skills. For this reason, it is necessary to have a level of political literacy knowledge to raise active and productive people, which is one of the most important goals of SSC. For this reason, knowing the basic knowledge, skills, values and concepts related to political literacy in the SST can lead to the emergence of ideas for solving the country's problems.

Active citizenship learning in SSC plays a direct role in developing political literacy skills. This learning area includes information about both political literacy and legal literacy. "In addition to improving their democratic skills, students try to understand what democratic ways are to influence the administration by learning the ways of participating in different official activities" (MoNE, 2018, pp.

11-32). They try to understand the existence of organised and systematic state power as the most important assurance of the problems that arise in social life.

**Table 1.** Distribution of literacy skills according to learning areas in the 2018 social studies curriculum

Distribution of literacy skills in the 2018 social studies curriculum				
Learning Area	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade
1. Individual and Society	Legal literacy (Recommendation)	Legal literacy (Recommendation)		Media literacy
2. Culture and Heritage				
3. Humans, Places and Environments	Digital literacy (Recommendation)	Map literacy Environmental literacy	Map literacy	
4. Science, Technology and Society	Digital literacy (Recommendation)	Digital literacy, Legal literacy (Recommendation)		
5. Production, Distribution and Consumption	Financial literacy	Legal literacy (Recommendation)		Digital literacy, (Recommendation)
6. Active Citizenship			Political literacy (Legal literacy)	Legal literacy (Recommendation)
7. Global Connections			Cultural literacy, (Recommendation)	(Political literacy) (Recommendation)

The data in Table 1 gives the literacy skills directly stated in the 2018 SSC. The 4th grade mentioned financial literacy only in production, distribution and consumption learning. The 5th grade mentioned map and environmental literacy in the learning area of people, places and environments. It also mentioned places, environments, and digital literacy in science, technology and community learning. The 6th grade mentioned map literacy in the learning area of people, places and environments. It also included political literacy in the learning area of active citizenship. The 7th grade mentioned media literacy in the field of individual and community learning area. Since these literacy skills were associated with achievements and values, they aimed to teach them according to the subjects in the teaching process. In this table, it is noteworthy that no literacy skills were included in the learning area of global connections with culture and heritage. The importance and sensitivity given to cultural heritage and the importance of political, information, technology, and cultural developments have been increasing daily. In particular, preserving historical and natural beauty is extremely important for the world's future. People who lack some values can harm when they visit these historical and natural beauties. Therefore, the importance of protecting cultural heritage has emerged for many reasons, such as painting some historical buildings, writing names on them and damaging the historical texture by treasure hunters. In this context, individuals must have cultural literacy knowledge to prevent such

problems in the future. Although the learning area of culture and heritage seems to be predominant in history, it is a learning area with subjects related to culture and heritage. Therefore, when evaluated in terms of literacy, it was compatible with cultural literacy knowledge. Putting this literacy skill in the program development and updating studies can help to eliminate the deficiency.

**Table 2.** Achievements suitable for literacy skills in the 2018 social studies curriculum

Learning Area	Grade	Achievements
Individual and Society	4th Grade	SS.4.1.1. Makes inferences about identity (Legal literacy) SS.4.5.3. Conscious consumer behaviours (Legal literacy) SS.4.6.1. Examples of child rights (Legal literacy) SS.4.6.4. Independence & freedom (Legal literacy)
	5th Grade	SS.5.1.1. Active citizen (Legal literacy) SS.5.5.6. Conscious consumer rights (Legal literacy)
	6th Grade	–
	7th Grade	SS.7.1.3. Role of media in social change (Media literacy)
	Culture and Heritage	4th Grade
Culture and Heritage	5th Grade	SS.5.2.1. Contributions of Anatolian/Mesopotamian civilizations SS.5.2.4. Cultural coexistence (Cultural literacy)
	6th Grade	–
	7th Grade	–
People, Places and Environments	4th Grade	SS.4.3.1. Location analysis (Digital literacy) SS.4.3.5. Landforms & population (Map literacy)
	5th Grade	SS.5.3.1. Landforms on maps (Map literacy) SS.5.3.2. Climate effects (Environmental literacy) SS.5.3.4. Causes of disasters (Environmental literacy)
	6th Grade	SS.6.3.1. Continents & oceans (Map literacy) SS.6.3.2. Landforms & climate of Türkiye (Map literacy) SS.6.3.3. Human geography features (Map literacy)
	7th Grade	–
Science, Technology and Society	4th Grade	SS.4.4.1. Classify technological products



		SS.4.4.2. Compare past/present uses (Digital literacy)
	5th Grade	SS.5.4.2. Reliability of virtual info (Digital literacy) SS.5.4.3. Security rules online (Digital, Legal literacy)
	6th Grade	–
	7th Grade	–
Production, Distribution and Consumption	4th Grade	SS.4.5.2. Family economic activities (Financial literacy) SS.4.5.4. Budget creation (Financial literacy)
	5th Grade	SS.5.5.1. Local economic activities (Financial literacy) SS.5.5.3. Economy's social impact (Financial literacy) SS.5.5.4. Production & consumption networks (Financial literacy) SS.5.5.6. Consumer rights (Legal literacy)
	6th Grade	–
	7th Grade	SS.7.5.6. E-commerce & digital economy (Digital literacy)
	4th Grade	–
Active Citizenship	5th Grade	SS.5.6.1. Institutions for needs (Legal literacy) SS.5.6.2. Duties of political units (Political literacy)
	6th Grade	SS.6.6.1. Compare governments (Political literacy) SS.6.6.2. Legislative-executive-judicial (Political literacy) SS.6.6.3. Decision-making process (Political literacy)
	7th Grade	SS.7.6.3. Republic qualities in practice (Legal literacy) SS.7.6.4. Democracy problems (Legal literacy)
	4th Grade	–
Global Connections	5th Grade	–
	6th Grade	SS.6.7.4. Popular culture effects (Cultural literacy)
	7th Grade	SS.7.7.4. Global problem-solving (Political literacy)
	4th Grade	–

Table 2 gives some achievements suitable for literacy in the 2018 SSC. Considering evaluations of these achievements according to literacy skills, the learning area named global connections with culture and heritage did not include any achievements. It was fully in line with the 2018 SSC. In this learning area, some suitable achievements for literacy have been proposed. However, since these learning areas are where subjects related to culture and heritage are predominant, giving appropriate achievements related to cultural literacy can be beneficial. In fact, in the current SSC, the achievements coded SS.5.2.1, SS.5.2.4, and SS.6.7.4. are related to cultural literacy. Additionally, in global connections, the achievements coded SS.7.7.4. are related to political literacy. Then, the learning area with the fewest learning achievements for literacy skills in the curriculum is the individual and community learning area. In this field, there is only an acquisition related to media literacy. The learning area with the more literacy-related achievements is people, places and environments, active citizenship, and production, distribution and consumption learning areas. In these learning areas, achievements towards map, environmental, financial, political, and legal literacy are predominant. Since we will encounter an IT-oriented world today and in the future, achievements related to digital literacy may be predominant. Literacy skills are included in the skills section of the 2018 SSC. This section also mentions legal literacy. However, there is no information about which learning area achievements include this literacy.

## **A Critical Approach**

### ***1. Thematic and Methodological Coherence***

The study analyzes the competencies of social studies textbooks in Türkiye in terms of literacy skills with a qualitative method based on documents in the context of the 2018 Social Studies Curriculum (SBÖP). In this respect, the study overlaps with many international studies based on content analysis of educational programs (Krippendorff, 2019).

### ***2. Literacy Conceptualization***

Seven main types of literacies were analyzed in the study: “*environmental, digital, financial, map, legal, media and political literacy*”. These skills are largely in line with the multiliteracies approach adopted by contemporary curriculum reforms (New London Group, 1996; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). However, other types of literacies, such as cultural and scientific literacies, which are becoming increasingly important in the literature, are not adequately addressed. While “*scientific literacy*”, as defined by the OECD within the scope of PISA criteria, includes individuals' ability to understand, interpret and evaluate scientific processes (OECD, 2019), these skills are expected to be included in social studies teaching (Bybee, 2013).

### **3. Curricular Distribution and Deficiencies**

In the study, especially in the learning areas of cultural heritage and global connections, literacy acquisition was given little space, which is contrary to the principle of interdisciplinary integrity. This contradicts the fact that cultural literacy should be one of the most basic functions of social studies teaching (Hirsch, 1988; Banks, 2006). Under the heading of global connections, media, cultural and environmental literacy were expected to be addressed, especially in terms of global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2015).

### **4. Political and Legal Literacy: A Combined and Problematic Framing**

Another noteworthy aspect of the study is that political and legal literacy are often presented intertwined. This may obscure the pedagogical goals of these two skills, which are treated as separate disciplines in the literature (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). While political literacy is associated with democratic participation and critical thinking (Galston, 2001), legal literacy is more about knowing one's rights and understanding basic information about the legal system (Tibbitts, 2002).

### **5. Digital and Media Literacy: Technological Reductionism**

Limiting digital literacy to technology usage skills weakens the critical dimension of this field. Researchers such as Eshet-Alkai (2004) and Hobbs (2010) emphasize that digital literacy includes not only technical skills but also multi-layered skills such as critical evaluation, ethical awareness and online content production. Likewise, media literacy involves the critique of media content in relation to social structures (Potter, 2018). These skills need to be presented in a more holistic and critical pedagogical framework.

### **6. International Benchmarking: A Gap in Global Alignment**

This raises the question of the extent to which the literacy skills present in social studies textbooks are in line with international standards. For example:

- In countries such as Finland and Canada, literacy skills form the backbone of social studies programs and are directly linked to 21st century skills (OECD, 2020).
- In Australia, media literacy is recognized as a core element of citizenship education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2023).
- While UNESCO's "Global Competency" framework emphasizes cultural awareness and mutual understanding in social studies courses, this dimension is underrepresented in the Turkish curriculum (UNESCO, 2015).

### **7. Recommendations for Curricular Development**

- New types of literacy such as cultural literacy and scientific literacy should be integrated into the curriculum at the formal attainment level (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

- Literacy skills should be built not only at the level of knowledge but also at the level of attitudes, values and actions (Gee, 2000).
- Curriculum updates should include clear, measurable goals for critical media and digital literacy that are linked to classroom practice.
- Social studies textbooks should be enriched with pedagogical approaches such as interdisciplinary projects, scenario-based learning, problem solving, and civic simulations (Banks, 2010).

When literacy skills in social studies textbooks are critically evaluated, Inconsistencies Between Curriculum and Textbook Content While the 2018 Social Studies Curriculum emphasizes seven key literacy areas—environmental, legal, digital, media, political, financial, and map literacy—the actual incorporation of these skills into textbooks is inconsistent across grade levels. For example: Environmental literacy is altogether absent in 7th grade, despite its spiral curriculum logic requiring reinforcement at each level due to its lifelong relevance. Such inconsistencies undermine the spiral and cumulative nature of the literacy education model, suggesting a disconnect between curricular intent and textbook execution. It shows that certain Literacies are more comprehensively represented in textbooks and learning areas, while others (especially legal and cultural literacy) are either superficially addressed. Moreover, the global connections, culture, and heritage learning areas conspicuously lack strong literacy-related achievements, despite being thematically relevant to cultural literacy. This gap reflects an undervaluation of cultural contextualization in a globalized world, where cross-cultural competence is increasingly crucial.

The textbooks do not specify how to teach literacy skills. Simply mentioning a concept such as “*budget*” or “*digital tools*” does not provide meaningful literacy development. For example: Digital literacy is reported to be covered in units such as “*we are in the age of digital technology*”, but there is limited evidence that these units critically engage with digital ethics, data security or digital citizenship. Map literacy, though progressively taught, is described more in terms of recognition and usage rather than analysis or problem-solving based on spatial data. Although the curriculum acknowledges the significance of emerging literacies, the textbook contents fall short of addressing 21st-century challenges, such as: “*Algorithmic and AI literacy, Global and intercultural communication, Ecological systems thinking, Financial decision-making in complex digital economies*” The study does not mention how these newer literacies are to be progressively introduced or scaffolded in a way that reflects global educational trends and demands.

In sum, while the study provides a systematic documentation of literacy skills within the current social studies curriculum, it also reveals substantial weaknesses in terms of. In particular ensuring vertical and horizontal alignment of literacy teaching across grade levels. Emphasizing active, inquiry-based, and interdisciplinary pedagogies. Regularly updating content to reflect societal, technological,

and global transformations. Such revisions would better position the Social Studies curriculum as a robust vehicle for literacy education aligned with democratic, civic, and global competencies.

## **RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

This study examined the Social Studies Curriculum (SSC) and Social Studies Textbooks (SSTs) in Türkiye in relation to literacy skills. The 2018 SSC included seven types of literacy: environmental, digital, political, legal, media, financial, and map literacy. The findings revealed, however, that their distribution across grades and learning areas is uneven. For example, 4th-grade students were expected to develop financial literacy only in the learning area of production, distribution, and consumption, whereas 5th graders encountered map and environmental literacy within people, places, and environments, and digital and media literacy within science, technology, and community. At the 6th-grade level, map literacy was addressed under people, places, and environments, and political literacy under active citizenship. In contrast, 7th-grade students developed only media literacy within the individual and community. No literacy outcomes were identified in the global connections with the culture and heritage area, and although legal literacy was listed among the general skills of the program, it was not reflected in specific learning achievements. This inconsistency indicates a curricular gap.

The results align with Demir's (2023) comprehensive analysis, which showed that approximately 84% of SSC learning outcomes are associated with literacy skills, with financial literacy receiving the greatest emphasis and media literacy the least. Such imbalance suggests the need for a more systematic and inclusive approach. Similarly, international studies emphasize that media literacy is often treated superficially, lacking critical perspectives that would empower students to evaluate information effectively (Albardía, Peña-Fernández, & Agirreazkuenaga, 2025; Livingstone, Stoilova, & Nandagiri, 2021).

Another important finding is the limited emphasis on global connections and cultural heritage. While the SSC highlights national citizenship, global citizenship and cultural diversity receive insufficient attention (Ersoy, 2013). Meray (2018) also underlines that human rights, tolerance, and peace are inadequately addressed in textbooks. This reflects international concerns that curricula should actively promote intercultural competence and global awareness (Zhao & Reyna, 2022).

In terms of learning areas, individuals and community contained the fewest literacy-related outcomes, with only media literacy included, whereas people, places, and environments; active citizenship; and production, distribution, and consumption featured more literacy-related content. This distribution confirms Güvenç's (2017) argument that social studies inherently supports the development of literacy skills but requires balanced structuring.

Specific skills such as map, financial, digital, and media literacy also showed uneven treatment. Map literacy, present across several grades, was introduced at a basic level in early grades and linked to

geography-oriented content such as “*Where We Live*” and “*Life on Earth*.” Research indicates that using visual and interactive materials can enhance students’ spatial abilities (Aksoy & Sönmez, 2012). Financial literacy was predominantly integrated into economic topics in production, distribution, and consumption units, which is consistent with Akhan’s (2009) observation that social studies naturally accommodates economic literacy. Digital literacy was situated within science, technology, and community across grades 4–6, but the focus remained narrow. Scholars argue that digital literacy must encompass not only technical competencies but also ethical awareness, critical thinking, and citizenship skills (Ng, 2012; Siddiq et al., 2016; Vuorikari, Kluzer, & Punie, 2022).

Overall, the distribution of literacy skills in SSC and SSTs is fragmented. Although the program includes various literacies, they are not systematically embedded across learning areas and grade levels. International reports emphasize the importance of integrating literacies holistically to prepare students for the complexities of the 21st century (OECD, 2018; Casal-Otero et al., 2023). Given the interdisciplinary nature of social studies, it offers a strong platform to cultivate diverse literacies if they are distributed consistently and supported through classroom activities and out-of-school experiences. Future curriculum reforms should therefore address these gaps by embedding global citizenship, intercultural competence, critical media literacy, and digital ethics more systematically to ensure that all students acquire the necessary literacies for active and responsible citizenship.

Based on the research results, the following recommendations can be made.

In SBTs, the number of subjects that fall directly within the scope of literacy can be increased.

In SSTs, activities related to literacy can be increased. The researchers can conduct theoretical and applied research to strengthen the relationship between the social studies course and literacy skills.

Researchers can design, develop and use SSTs and literacy-related activities for the teaching process.

Considering the examinations of the achievements in SSC and the subjects in the textbooks, there were some knowledge, skills, values and concepts for cultural and scientific literacy. For this reason, experimental and action research can be conducted to put such new literacies in the next curriculum update and development studies.

### **Additional Declaration**

#### ***Author Contributions***

In this study, the contribution of the authors was equal; both authors contributed equally to the development of the research idea, data analysis, writing and proofreading stages.

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### **Responsible Artificial Intelligence Statement**

No artificial intelligence support was received in any part of this study.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this study.

### **Ethics Approval**

This study does not require ethics committee approval as it does not involve any direct application on human or animal subjects.

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